

Ecclesiastes

Chapter 5

Fear God

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. 2 Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. 3 For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words. 4 When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. 6 Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? 7 For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.

5:1–7 The theme of this section is the meaninglessness of superficial religion, as reflected in making rash vows. (CSB)

This section marks another important turning point in the Teacher's stream of thought. He has said much about the meaningless life under the sun, without God. He has also shown that God is in control and, whether we realize it or not, we are completely dependent on Him (chapter 3). Now King Solomon brings God into the picture even more. He talks about our duty to worship God. At this point Solomon also begins to involve the reader or listener more directly. Instead of talking about the world or himself or others, he uses the second person pronoun: "you." (PBC)

5:1 *Guard your steps.* Think about what you ought to say and do. (CSB)

Avoid hypocritical religion and devotion. (TLSB)

This and the six following verses contain a warning against inconsideration in God's service, in respect to sacrifices, prayers, and vows. An obedient and teachable spirit is more acceptable to God than all the outward services, which are performed in an inconsiderate and presumptuous way. (Concordia Bible)

go to the house of God – Perhaps you've noticed that when Solomon speaks about God he avoids using the common term "the Lord." "Yahweh," or "the Lord" was the special name God revealed to His OT nation Israel. It represented God's qualities of free and steadfast grace (Exodus 34:4-7). The promises of forgiveness and the coming Savior were closely linked to the name "the Lord," which occurs over 5000 times in the OT. Possibly because he's speaking in general terms for all nations, King Solomon only uses the more general word for God. Or, as others have suggested, it might be a sign of "unworthiness of the privileges of a son of the Covenant that he avoids the name of the Lord of the Covenant. (PBC)

Temple built by Solomon (1Ki 5–6). The temple was not merely a place of sacrifice, but also a place of teaching. (TLSB)

The Israelites considered the name too holy to be spoken by human lips. Whenever they needed to say Yahweh, they substituted the word Adonai, which means “Lord,” If the name needed to be written, the scribes would take a bath before they wrote it and destroy the pen afterward. (Luc–Light)

listen. Obey. 1Sa 15:22 uses the same Hebrew verb and makes the same contrast between real and superficial worship. (CSB)

Do not despise God’s Word and the preaching of it, but inwardly digest and ruminate upon the Word. (TLSB)

This is similar to the words the Prophet Samuel had spoken to King Saul, “Does the Lord delight in burnt offering and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22). Saul had not obeyed God’s command to completely destroy his enemies the Amalekites and all their possessions. (PBC)

Of first importance is hearing and taking to heart the Word which is read and proclaimed in church. Jesus said, “Blessed...are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28). The fool, however, blindly thinks he’s doing all right by going through the motions. To the Hebrews a fool was not someone lacking intelligence, but a person lacking in morals and a right relationship with God. (PBC)

sacrifice. Probably connected with the vow of vv. 4–6. (CSB)

Offering of the torn, sick, lame, and worthless (see pp 170–71; cf Pr 21:3, 7; Is 1:11–15; Jer 6:20). This is an abomination to the Lord. Those who cheat God cheat their own souls. Luther: “When senseless people hear this doctrine, that we should have such a quiet and peaceful heart that we commit everything to God, they draw this inference: ‘If everything is in the hand of God, we shall not do any works.’ In the same way others sin in the opposite direction by being excessively solicitous and wanting to measure and control everything in every way. But one should travel on the royal road. Let us work hard and do whatever we can in accordance with the Word of God; let us not, however, measure the work on the basis of our efforts, but commit every effort and plan and outcome to the wisdom of God. Therefore Solomon seems to me to be anticipating an objection here and addressing a salutary exhortation to those who are not traveling on the middle road but are either too negligent of their work or too concerned about it. He advises them to let themselves be governed by the Word of God and meanwhile to work diligently” (AE 15:74–75). (TLSB)

5:2 *do not be rash.* As in a rash vow. (CSB)

Many a prayer which men call eloquent is abominable in God’s sight, because it comes from a spirit of levity and self-complacency. True reverence for Him will check the vain flow of words. (Concordia Bible)

Solomon goes on to state that while we should be eager to listen to God’s word, we should not speak too hastily. James put it this way, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak...” (James 1:19). Just as we have a natural sinful inclination to try to buy God off, we also have the tendency to make rash promises. Often in an hour of need people promise to do all sorts of great things, if God will get them out of their difficulty. Then, once the trouble has passed, the promise is forgotten. (PBC)

heaven...earth – Gregory of Nyssa: “He shows, I think, ... by their distance, how far the divine nature is above the speculations of human reason ... as high above earthly calculation as the stars are above the touch of our fingers; or rather, many times more than that” (NPNF 2 5:260). (TLSB)

5:3 A proverb. In the context it suggests that in the midst of cares a person dreams of bliss (as a starving man dreams of a banquet), and in anticipation may offer rash vows (“many words”) to God (see v. 7). (CSB)

A fool’s words poured out at random are like the confused images of a troubled dream. (Concordia Bible)

With this remark he is simply making a comparison: empty words flow from a fool’s mouth as dreams flutter through a restless mind. (PBC)

many words – Jesus also tells us to avoid wordiness when speaking to God. “When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask” (Matthew 6:7, 8). We earthbound creatures need to remember we are dealing with our almighty Father in heaven. We can be honest with Him. We can’t fool Him with a lot of empty words. (PBC)

Hectic pace of labor disturbs our sleep. In prayer, a fool is known by a multiplicity of words (cf 5:7; Pr 10:8, 10). (TLSB)

5:4 vow. See Dt 23:21–23; 1Sa 1:11, 24–28. (CSB)

Hebrew *neder*. An offering expresses thanksgiving to God (Nu 21:1–3; Ps 116:14; Na 1:15). (TLSB)

The first vow recorded in Scripture was made by Jacob. When he left home as a young man, he promised, “If God will be with me and watch over me on this journey...then the Lord will be my God...and of all that you [God] give me I will give you back a tenth” (Genesis 28:20-22). Years later Jacob returned to Bethel, the place he made that vow. He built an altar there and, we can assume, in thankfulness fulfilled his promise (Genesis 35:7). On another occasion, Hannah vowed that if God gave her a son she would “give him to the Lord for all the days of his life” (1 Samuel 1:11). She did have a son and gave him to God’s work after naming him Samuel, which means “God hears.” God had heard her prayer and blessed her with a son. (PBC)

do not delay payment – Offering an animal (cf Lv 27:9–13). To make a vow and not fulfill it incurs the guilt of treachery and perjury; it is simply lying to God (see p 7; cf Dt 6:13; Heb 6:16). (TLSB)

no pleasure in fools. In Scripture the fool is not one who cannot learn, but one who refuses to learn (see Pr 1:20–27). (CSB)

5:6 *lead you into sin* – To bring guilt and trouble upon yourself by a hasty vow that will not be fulfilled. (Concordia Bible)

messenger. See Mal 2:7. (CSB)

Hbr *mal'ak*, cf Mal 2:7. The priest is to teach the Law of Moses (Lv 10:11; Zep 3:4; Hg 2:11) as one by whom the people could inquire of God. (TLSB)

The word angel means messenger. Here we are probably to understand the priest, as appointed by God to expound to men the Levitical law. (Concordia Bible)

was a mistake – By saying this, he attempts to excuse himself from paying it. (Concordia Bible)

5:7 *God is the one you must fear* – For the OT people vows were optional. It's the same today. We don't have to make promises. But if we do, we should be serious. Baptismal sponsors promise to remember the child in their prayers. At their confirmation young men and women vow "to remain true to the triune God, even unto death." Some Christians pledge to off a definite amount of money to the Lord in keeping with their income. People who get married vow to remain faithful "till death." (PBC)

5:1–7 The wicked and foolish sin against God in acts of religious complacency, empty devotion, and unfulfilled vows. Despite superficial religion and meaningless vows, God is faithful and just. Upon our confession, He will absolve us of our sins for the sake of Christ. • O merciful and eternal God, You speak to us of the greatest and highest things, of life eternal and blessed innocence in Your kingdom of heaven. We are dust and ashes and stand in need of Your Word constantly. Grant us Your grace and enlighten us with Your truth. Amen. (TLSB)

The Vanity of Wealth and Honor

8 If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them. **9** But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields.

10 He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. **11** When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? **12** Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.

13 There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, **14** and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. **15** As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. **16** This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? **17** Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger. **18** Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment] in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. **19** Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. **20** For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

5:8 *do not be amazed*. For other frank appraisals of human society see 4:1–3. This teacher, like Jesus, who "knew what was in a man" (Jn 2:25), had no illusions or utopian schemes. (CSB)

Do not be surprised at such oppression and perversion of justice, for these are in the hearts of sinful people (cf Jn 2:24–25). God's eyes are on the self-exalted (cf Jb 24:22–24). (TLSB)

are higher ones – Presidents, governors, senators, judges, etc., are necessary for good order and all are accountable to God. (TLSB)

5:9 *gain of land*. Sinful leaders abuse their God-given authority and hoard instead of serve (cf Ps 68:6; Lk 12:15). *gain*. Income obtained on the earth for the comfort of human life. *cultivated fields*. In a farming economy, nothing was more important. (TLSB)

5:10-20 It is difficult to date or identify the author of Ecclesiastes. Some conservative scholars have defended Solomonic authorship, while others have placed it much later. The lack of consensus on these points suggests that the author might simply be best referred to by his Hebrew title, *Kohelet*. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 4)

As a part of the canon of Holy Scripture, the book provides a marvelous though often discomfiting portrait of life. Shaped by an intricate system of polarities (see especially ch 3), the author is sometimes thought to be pessimistic or even cynical. I would suggest that “realistic” is a more apt description. Apart from God, all things are meaningless. But with him, in him, and through him, all things have meaning and purpose, and the believer has hope and joy. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 4)

5:10 Greater wealth does not bring satisfaction (see 1Ti 6:9–10). (CSB)

Corrupt desires are insatiable. Consider the difference between need and desire (cf Mt 6:19–21, 24–34; 1Tm 6:9–10). (TLSB)

Behind this greed lies an insatiable lust for money. Those who love money never have enough. The elder Rockefeller was once asked, “How much money does it take to satisfy a person?” The billionaire snapped back, “Always a little more!” (PBC)

The Hebrew word *kesep*, “silver,” is here translated as “money” and repeated twice for emphasis. This is a synecdoche for wealth, i.e., the use of the specific for the general. The author warns about the love of earthly wealth by using the verb *a’hb*, “love,” that is here and elsewhere translated ἀγαπάω in the Septuagint. The condition described is that of a kind of devotion that is modeled on God’s love for the world and the love we are to bear toward him. Thus, this is idolatry because silver is exchanged for God as the object of love. For this reason, a lover of money is excluded from the Pastoral Office (1 Tim 3:3), and St. Paul further warns that the “love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” because it leads one away from the faith (1 Tim 6:10). (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 4)

“This also is vanity.” The Hebrew noun *habel* (here translated “vanity” in the ESV) is a particularly rich term and common in Ecclesiastes, appearing some thirty-five times in the book. (See, for example, the opening verses, 1:1–2.) It can mean “breath” but usually means vanity, meaninglessness, perishing. A theme of Ecclesiastes is that earthly things have no meaning when they are possessed apart from God. Here, wealth is not just apart from God, but is loved instead of God. There is nothing satisfying for such a person. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 4)

5:11–12 Greater wealth brings greater anxiety. (CSB)

Great wealth brings greater anxiety (see SC, Ninth and Tenth Commandments, p xxxvi). The more one has, the more one covets. (TLSB)

It does not satisfy. It brings an increase of retinue and expenditure and deprives its owners of sleep. (Concordia Bible)

True rest is found in the Lord, not in abundance (cf Lk 12:13–21). (TLSB)

A man might become so wealthy that he has more riches than he could ever use; all he can do is “feast his eyes on them.” For all his wealth, such a man isn’t much better off than a poor man who also feasts his eyes on riches he can’t make use of. Still another person might have enough money to be a man of leisure, but for one reason or another is never able to enjoy his leisure. (PBC)

The more a person gains “goods,” *hatobah* (that is, the “money” of v 10 and the things money can buy), and makes them his god, the more that person loses any peace and real security. Others will try to benefit from the rich (“they increase who eat them”), and he will lose sleep at night. This is contrasted to the “laborer” (*ha’bed*), that is, the one who works for a living, who finds sleep at the close of day regardless of how much he possesses. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 4)

Lutheran Hour Ministries – 9/9/15

... for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.
Philippians 4:11b-13

Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming is a spectacular and an incredibly fascinating place.

With its bubbling paint pots, its geysers which perform, more or less, according to schedule, and an abundance of flora and fauna, Yellowstone has something for everyone to see. It's not an exaggeration to say it offers a kaleidoscope of ever-changing vistas and experiences.

That being said, it's easy to understand why more than three million people will make the pilgrimage to spend some time in one of the Lord's pretty-near perfect places.

Did you notice the carefully chosen words in that last sentence: *pretty-near perfect places*?

I wrote "pretty-near perfect" because there are some folks who find Yellowstone disappointing. For example, this year a suggestion was turned in by a person who apparently stayed at Yellowstone Lodge. The note said, "Our visit was wonderful but we never saw any bears. Please train your bears to be where guests can see them. This was too expensive to not get to see bears."

Although I have not spoken to any Yellowstone rangers, I believe it unlikely they will be implementing this suggestion any time soon. I guess it all goes to prove that you can't please everybody.

Years ago, during a confirmation discussion on the Lord's omnipotence, a student raised her hand and said, "I know something God can't do. God can't please everybody." She was right. God couldn't please Adam and Eve with a perfect Garden and He hasn't pleased most people since the fall into sin.

All too often sinners believe *God does too little, too much, too soon, or too late.*

Sinners believe that because they think they know better than the Lord when it comes to how and when things should be done. I am afraid it takes some maturing and experience for people to get to that point where they can join their voices to that of St. Paul and say, "I have learned in whatever situation I find myself to be content."

It takes a bit of faith to sincerely pray, "Nevertheless, Thy will, not mine be done" (see Luke 8:22:42).

Still, contentment with and acceptance of God's wisdom is the Christian's goal. We need to strive for a faith that knows the Heavenly Father who sent His Son to give His life as a ransom for sinful humanity is always going to do what is right and best for us -- always, every time.

And that may even mean we are content when we don't see bears when we go to Yellowstone.

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, let me be content to trust Your grace and mercy in every situation of life. This I ask in Jesus' Name. Amen.

5:13-14 These beautifully constructed verses describe the futility of loving one's wealth. Hidden in the English translation in v 13 is the repetition of the word *ra'ah*, "evil," to open and close v 13. The beginning and end of v 13 might be translated as "There is a grievous evil . . . to his evil," rather than "There is a grievous evil . . . to his hurt" as in the ESV. Moreover, this is termed a "grievous evil," a phrase that will recur in v 16. Just how *habel*, "vain," love of money is (v 10) can be empirically verified by the results from a "bad venture" (*bə 'inyav ra'*, i.e., business deal)—the rich person, who loves his money, is left with nothing to pass on to his own child. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 4)

5:13 *grievous evil* – After a life of toil to both the owner and his heirs, it must at all events be left behind at death. (Concordia Bible)

When one of the wealthiest men in history, John D. Rockefeller, died, his accountant was asked, "How much did John D leave?" The accountant's reply? "All of it." (Luc-Light)

hurt. Including worry about his possessions. (CSB)

Hoarding wealth can invite charlatans, sin, pride, and love of money, thus drawing one away from the Lord and His Word. (TLSB)

In his greed a man might hoard his wealth. He becomes so obsessed with it that he becomes a slave to it. (PBC)

5:14 *riches were lost* – We shouldn't get the idea from the word translated "misfortune" that Solomon is talking about bad luck. As was mentioned earlier, the Bible rules out the concepts of luck or chance. God is always working behind the scenes. He is in control. (PBC)

Things are not always as they seem. Entrepreneurs often have debt that exceeds their assets, making their apparent fortune worthless. This man is even unable to provide for his child. (TLSB)

5:15-16 There are no trailer hitches on hearses! Just as (*ka'asher*) one is born naked, that is precisely how one exits this world. The Hebrew word *'arom*, "naked," is the same word used to

describe Adam and Eve in their original state of innocence (Gen 3:1). (See Luke 12:14–21.) This is a “grievous evil” (*ra’ah cholah*) in v 16, a phrase already seen in v 13. If one’s life is defined by those things that must be left behind at death, all of the effort to gain more earthly possessions is like laboring for the wind; just as you cannot possess and keep the wind, neither can you truly possess and keep the riches of earth. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 4)

5:15 *shall take nothing*. See Lk 12:14–21. (CSB)

Cradle to grave. We come into the world with nothing and depart the same way (cf Lk 12:14–21). The rich and the poor are equalized. (TLSB)

The loss of wealth by “evil toil” leads the Preacher’s thoughts to its final and inevitable loss at death. (Concordia Bible)

It’s said that when Alexander the Great lay on his deathbed he commanded that contrary to the usual custom his hands not be wrapped. He wanted everyone to see his empty hands as he was carried to his grave. And so in death the great conqueror and king of nations was on equal terms with the poorest beggar. (PBC)

When one of the wealthiest men in history, John D. Rockefeller, died, his accountant was asked, “How much did John D leave?” The accountant’s reply? “All of it.” (Lucado-Light)

When Job lost all his wealth, he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:21). St Paul probably had both Job and Ecclesiastes in mind when he wrote, “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we can be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:6-10). (PBC)

5:16 *grievous evil* – Temporal world is fleeting and retreats from us at death. (TLSB)

5:17 *Eats in darkness* – This depicts the greedy man working late into the night before taking time to eat. (PBC)

He eats the bread of sorrows. This is not a repentant sorrow before God (cf Ps 77:2) but anger in old age, where affliction and failing health beg the question as to the worthiness of laboring “under the sun.” (TLSB)

The person who substitutes possessions for God will live “all his days” (*kal yamav*) in a state of darkness, vexation or sadness, sickness, and anger. This is as good as it gets without God. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 4)

vexation and sickness and anger – That’s what people get if riches are their obsession. And in the end they inherit not even the wind which blows across their grave. (PBC)

5:18-19 But there is another way unlike the hopeless life lived apart from God. The writer tells us that, in contrast to vv 13 and 16, where he saw a “grievous evil,” “I have seen good.” In place of the evil meaninglessness of a life lived loving possessions is a life lived in the toil “that God has

given him” (*’asher natan lo ha’elohim*). When life is lived in the knowledge of God, even toil for the few days of life on earth is joyous and fulfilling. As “vanity” or “meaninglessness” is a theme in Ecclesiastes, so also is pleasure in the simple joys of life in God’s creation (see 2:24–5; 3:12–13). “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth” confesses the goodness of life in a creation of God. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 4)

5:18 *good and fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment* – Since riches are unsatisfying, uncertain, attended with an increase of trouble and anxiety, and must all be left behind at death, the wise man will be contented with the supply of his daily wants, and will lay up treasure in heaven. (CB)

Theme of 2:24–25; 3:12–13, 22 returns. Only in God does life have meaning and true pleasure. Without Him, nothing satisfies. True pleasure comes only when we acknowledge and revere God (12:13). (TLSB)

Here Solomon paints a much happier scene than in the previous verses. He shows us a household where godliness and contentment reign in place of greed and discontent. He portrays a child of God, a believer. (PBC)

in all the toil – Although labor remains “toilsome” for this person, he is able “to find satisfaction” in it. God enables him to enjoy his possessions and to “be happy in his work.” This worker accepts his lot in life – his talents, opportunities and possessions. His work is not a frenzied attempt to pile up riches. He works because it’s the lot God has given him in life. In the words of Paul, we are to do “all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). WE try to make the best possible use of our life as a way of saying thanks to God for the gift of life and for His many blessings. (PBC)

5:19 *gift* – Cf Ps 145:15–16. Life is God’s gift, as is the enjoyment of life. He appoints the number of days we have to serve Him with joy and gladness of heart (Jb 14:5). (TLSB)

5:20 *days of his life* – Often the evils that attended them (Concordia Bible)

keeps him occupied with joy in his heart – Answers his desire in the joy with which he fills his heart. The thankful and contented enjoyment of God’s present gifts causes him to forget the ills with which life is checkered. (Concordia Bible)

A cheerful heart is a gift of God. It allows life’s most difficult experiences to pale in comparison with the inexpressible love He has first demonstrated to us by grace alone. (TLSB)

“God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.” The “heart” (*leb*) is the center of one’s thoughts, hopes, and feelings. This heart is filled “with joy” (*bāsīmchat*). (See Ps 45:16; Ps 106:5.) No matter the circumstances, even in the midst of difficulties and labor, the Lord gives joy to one who recognizes him. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 4)

He isn’t filled with worry but with gladness. Jesus says, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. It not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?...But seek first [God’s] kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:25-34). (PBC)

Where does one find gladness of heart and the kingdom of God and His righteousness? They come only from listening to God’s Word. The Bible alone tells us of God’s love in Christ the

Savior – promised in the OT and fulfilled in the NT. To have Christ is to possess the highest wisdom and most priceless treasure. Then our lives will be truly happy regardless of our circumstances. (PBC)